

[Ben Thompson]

Ruby Maloney Austin, Texas

JUL -1 1938 #9 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF BEN THOMPSON

Ben Thompson was born in [1845?], of English parents. The name of Thompson has spread to the extreme borders of this country, over its mountains and valleys, through the mines of Mexico, the mines of California, the mineral fields of Colorado and the far interior and even beyond the oceans, for he had kindred in Old England on one side of us, and far Australia on the other.

A brave, fearless man, retiring and charitable as a woman when not aroused by the perpetration of wrong or injustice on him self, or others unable to cope with assailants, he was dangerous, deadly and quick as a bolt of lightning when the supreme moment of recessity, safety and action came. His appearance was attractive when his indignation was not on fire. The subject of this sketch was, at his untimely "taking off," forty-one years old, five feet and nine inches high, rather swarthy complexion, stoutly built, weighing about 170 pounds, black hair and blue eyes, quick in all his motions, of indomitable energy, and modest and retiring in demeanor. He spoke gently, and was a handsome, generous man; the friend of the weak and oppressed, fearless as a lion, and although it has been his fate or misfortune to repeatedly take human life, it has ever been done in self-defense, or at least under circumstances that enabled juries to acquit him. Many heroic deeds had he accomplished which he deserved credit for. [?] C. 12 - 2/11/41 Tex. 2 was no part of Ben Thompson's nature. Generous to a fault, he bore no ill will to anyone. It was natural for him to forgive a wrong, and instances are known where, under the most aggravating circumstances, he freely forgave the injurer, and afterward, by generosity, made the wrong-doer a friend. A Printer Boy

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Ben Thompson at the age of fourteen commenced to learn the printing business, and during the time he followed it, acquired sufficient proficiency in it to be a good workman and receive fair wages. But the course of events in Texas and Mexico at the time Ben was working at his trade were of too exciting a nature for a man of this temperament to follow so peaceful an occupation. A year or two before the war between the states Ben was in New Orleans, where he had gone to work with a book binder who had formerly carried on business in Austin. He Stick La Tour

His first difficulty was in New Orleans with a Frenchman named La Tour, who attempted to kiss a girl in an omnibus in which he was riding. The Frenchman had been to a ball, was full of wine, and when Ben interfered to protect the girl who screamed for assistance, called him an American puppy and stuck him. Quicker than thought Ben pulled out a dirk knife and stabbed the Frenchman in the shoulder, and would have killed him had not the friends of 3 the Frenchman stopped the fight. He returned to Texas about the time that Gen. Cortina, with a considerable army was operating on the Rio Grande by the Texas State Authorities, Ben repaired thither and joined him, and here was the initial move in Ben Thompson's career that shaped the course of his life for years and turned him from the quiet walks of every day existence to be an actor or principal in scenes and incidents that, were they transcribed to paper, would read more like the Arabian Knight's entertainments than the actual occurrences of life - love of adventure, positions of danger, a life of excitement that fed on excitement. He Shoots a Sergeant

When the Cortina war ended the war between the north and South had just begun. Ben at an early day enlisted in the regiment of Col. John [?]. Baylor and proceeded enroute with his comrades to New Mexico.

When at Fort Clark temporarily, Ben for some unknown reason, was generally late when rations were issued, and on one occasion he was compelled to appropriate some

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necessary articles, one article in particular being a candle, by which he could make “lay-outs” for the boys at monte.

When the boys discovered that Ben perpetrated the act, he endeavored to reprimand him in harsh terms, calling him a liar and thief. As he said this he approached Ben menacingly, who said, “Sergeant Vance, don't come any nearer; if you do you will repent it!” Vance continued to approach, and as he did so he began to draw his six shooter; but he was too slow; Ben drew his pistol and fired 4 simultaneously with the Sergeant. His ball went through the body of Vance, and through both legs of a soldier who was standing in range. Ben was not touched for a wonder, as his antagonist was only a few feet from him. Lieut. Hughes was standing near, and instead of arresting him or ordering him arrested, made at him with the evident intent of cutting him down. Ben fenced with his pistol as well as he could, at the same time demanding of the officer to cease his assault. He Kills an Officer

Ben saw the officer was bent on killing him, and, quick as thought, fired, striking the officer in the neck. He finally surrendered to the Captain, remarking: “Captain, I surrender to you, and would have yielded to them had they sought to arrest me instead of kill me. I am but a private, still my life is dearer to me than either of them, judging by the way they threw theirs away.” Ben was made a prisoner. At first it was thought both the wounded officers were [?]. The first slowly recovered; the later died in six weeks. Thus again Ben was in trouble. He was subjected to the greatest cruelty chained to a prison floor for more than a month on the flat of his back, until the hard boards were even his flesh away. A Friend to the Rescue

With some matches furnished him by a [comanche?] he fired the prison and came near “going up” before he was rescued. 5 Saved by Smallpox

The smallpox, or what was thought to be that dreaded disease, breaking out among the troops, nurses could not be obtained, and Ben volunteered to attend upon the sick and his

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services were gladly accepted and he was released for the purpose. The disease proved to be chicken pox, and Ben made good use of his opportunity and [Escaped?]

Ventured 200 miles to another camp and remained there until his time of enlistment expired, being twelve months. He then returned to Fort Clark. He was never tried for the killing of Lieut. Hughes. His time expired and/ a court martial had no jurisdiction.

The next serious affray was with John Coombs.

whom he killed in Austin. It was in a general street fight, and the difficulty originated about the captaincy of a military company. Capt. [?] was in the fight, which took place near [?] livery stable. Another man was seriously wounded at the same time. He was admitted to bail in the case by Justice McLaughlin, stood trial and the jury acquitted him. At the close of war Ben's regiment was disbanded at Waco, and he returned home where he remained, attending to his own business and molesting no one, until the arrival of the first Louisiana Cavalry, commanded by Col. Badger. On the day after the arrival of this regiment in Austin (the latter part of May the first of April, 1845) an order was issued by Col. Badger for the arrest of Thompson. No crime or offense of any kind was mentioned in the order. He was arrested and placed in the Travis County jail. We were then under military rule and officers of the United States army did pretty much as they pleased with citizens. After exhausting every fair means that his friends and himself were capable of, Ben made his escape through the connivance with two sergeants of the guard, and accompanied by these two friends and five enlisted federal soldiers the whole party succeeded in making their escape to Mexico. Maximilian

was struggling in Mexico to sustain himself in the false position in which the diplomacy of Napoleon had placed him.

The down fall of the Southern confederacy had opened the door to recruit soldiers of fortune who believed them selves with home or country, and Ben and his comrades linked their fate [and?] fortunes with this [?] unfortunate emperor and his equally unfortunate

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cause, and remained in his army as a Captain until Maximilian's capture and execution. While in the Mexican army he had a Difficulty with a Mexican Officer, which was [one?] of the most desperate affrays in which he was over engaged, as it was hand-to-hand, and his antagonist got in a knife thrust before Ben could use his pistol, which he did most effectually, putting four loads into the Mexican. It had its origin in the officer maltreating some of Ben's men while they were in the guard house. Kills a Lieutenant

The third encounter in which Ben was engaged was at Laredo, with a Mexican lieutenant named Martino Gonzales. He had won money and pistols of some Mexican soldiers at Monte, and the lieutenant and Ben had hot words about it, which resulted in a fight with pistols, in which the lieutenant received a ball through the breast that proved fatal. Probably one of the most noted episodes in the history of Ben Thompson occurred after his return from Leadville, and came near resulting in a Pitched Battle between the forces employed by the rival roads. The war between the Atchinson Topeka and Santa Fe and Denver and Rio Grande railroads was then at daggers' point. The managements of both were determined to carry their respective points, even if blood shed was the result. Forces were marshaled and preparations made for the seizure and holding of the property in dispute. The character of Ben Thompson being well known, he was approached to enlist his services in behalf of the first named company. He was not disposed to interfere in the matter. While ready to take up arms against the public enemy or in private quarrel, when conscious of being in the right, he hesitated to take part between corporations, when the right on the one side or the other was susceptible of easy [solution?] by having recourse to the courts of the country; but he was over persuaded by several of the prominent men interested. [?] agreed, for the sum of five thousand dollars, to take the action desired, viz; to hold a certain round house until, overpowered by superior force, or until the officers of the law, should the law be appealed to, show force enough in his front to probably make a serious fight. Thompson made the pledge, "I will die unless the law relieves me." 8 All efforts to dislodge him failed. Officers finally came, Ben walked out and surrendered the round house to the sheriff. He then demanded of the train dispatches a special train to

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take him and his men out of the state. It was at first refused, but when Ben proclaimed that he would kill every officer of the company if it was not furnished, the train was forth coming, and putting his men on the train, and ascertaining that there was a clear track, he ordered the conductor to “turn her loose”, and landed safely in Dodge City, Kan. before morning. Mark Wilson

The difficulty between Thompson and Mark Wilson, which resulted in the death of Wilson and serious wounding of Charley Matthews is too fresh in the minds of our readers to call for rehearsal. Jack Harris

The same reasons exist with regard to the difficulty between him and Jack Harris, in this same [?] Theater at San Antonio, where Ben Thompson, Tuesday night, met his death. The incidents of the homicide and the subsequent trial and acquittal of Thompson are still fresh in the minds of people of both Austin and San Antonio. But these two tragedies are both out growth of the same cause, it is deemed best to recapitulate the two homicides and their causes. Thompson, while in San Antonio went into a gambling house owned by Jack Harris, Joe Foster, Billy Simms, and probably some others. Ben had lost heavily, and had pledged his jewelry to the gambling house. The jewelry consisted of some very valuable diamonds. Subsequently Thompson was told that a job had been fixed upon him 9 and that he had been robbed, without any chance of winning and being in the mood that losers generally get into under such circumstances, he went to the gambling house and took his diamonds again into his possession at the point of his pistol, using language that was pretty forcible, in fact cursed the whole house, and denounced them as theives. Jack Harris, one of the firm, was a man of violent temper, and Thompson's action irritated him to such an extent that he was ready at any time for a difficulty with Thompson.

Thus matters stood when Ben went to San Antonio, and he and Jack Harris met face to face, Ben on the sidewalk in front and Harris inside the vaudeville theater, with a shot gun in his hands. Harris was killed in the act of getting his gun in position to shoot Thompson. The main witnesses for the prosecution in the Harris-Thompson case were Billy Simms

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and Joe Foster, and what money was needed in the prosecution was said to have been furnished them. The trial was long and bitter, and intensified the feeling on both sides. Consequently the parties to the tragedy of Tuesday night in San Antonio had every reason to believe that fresh trouble would arise should circumstances present the opportunity. The delvish opportunity was presented, and our readers are already aware of the result.

In the early life, death and incidents in the history of Ben Thompson are presented some of the strangest [?] of which human nature is capable. Blended with afforent recklessness was a compact and will managed mind; the principal actor in scenes where 10 lawlessness was a leading feature, when placed in position as an officer of law and preserver of order, no one could be more strict, forseeing and successful. A terror himself to the officers of the law in Austin, when, in the position of city marshal, he was likewise a terror to evil doers, and made one of the best officers the city ever had. Wilful, passionate at times, when excited he was yet patient, mild and just..

While living Ben Thompson entertained a holy horror of reportorial inaccuracy, and was more apt to become offended with a Bohemian for failing to state the most damaging facts, than for magnifying his exploits. The truth he could stand what ever that was, but a lie he hated and could not tolerate the slightest misrepresentation as to his forays and war-plays. If the poor fellow could read the world's newspapers this morning his brave sould would probably shrink from the hereuteen task of punishing his slanderers. Much that has been printed about the dead man is doubtless very highly colored, but there is an average vein of truth running through it all that photographs one of the most remarkable men of the times and upon whose like a generation may not look again. He possessed many good traits of character - if bad ones, let them sleep in the bloody grave where rest the immortal remains.

The Daily Capitol, March 13, 1884.